

## Route 600 Reconstruction Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony (October 24, 2005)

I am pleased to return to Konnarock this morning to celebrate the completion of the new Route 600, a federally funded project which will boost the tourism economies of Smyth, Washington and Grayson Counties and give local residents a much safer and quicker access to Chilhowie and Interstate 81.

A significant aspect of my office's effort to expand Southwest Virginia's tourism economy began in the late 1980's when I launched a project to provide rapid and efficient direct access from Interstate 81 at Chilhowie to the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area in the vicinity of the Konnarock community. This access has now been achieved through the reconstruction, straightening and widening of Route 600.

Since the project's inception, I have obtained more than \$19.1 million in federal funding for this effort. This sum represents more than 90 percent of the total funding needed for the project. The Virginia Department of Transportation has provided a match of approximately \$1.2 million to complete the \$20.3 million funding package.

In its previous condition, Route 600 contained numerous sharp turns and was extremely narrow, particularly along its mountainous stretches. The roadway also posed a special danger to school buses and other forms of group transportation.

A total of 6.63 miles of Route 600 has now been reconstructed. The reconstruction work was performed in four separate segments. The first two segments of the roadway improvement project were completed in the 1990's and stretched 2.28 miles between Route 604 and Little Laurel Creek. The third segment, which was completed in 2003, stretched 3.03 miles from just outside the town limits of Chilhowie to Route 604. Today we celebrate the completion of the final 1.32 mile segment of roadway from Little Laurel Creek to a point on the existing road just before the intersection of Route 600 and Route 603 near Konnarock.

Local and visiting motorists will now experience a much safer and quicker trip along Route 600 from Interstate 81 to Route 603. Before improvements to the road were made, the trip between Chilhowie to Konnarock took approximately 40 minutes. Now that the reconstruction of Route 600 is complete, the travel time will be reduced to approximately 15 minutes, creating convenient access to I-81 for the residents of the Konnarock, Green Cove and Whitetop communities to I-81.

The completed improvements to Route 600 will ensure that the road becomes a major point of access to the Jefferson National Forest and the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area. Tourism is our region's greatest untapped economic resource, and the Route 600 project is a major cornerstone of our efforts to realize tourism growth for the economies of Smyth, Washington and Grayson Counties.

One of our region's premier tourism assets is the Mount Rogers-Whitetop vicinity which encompasses the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area and its campgrounds, the Grayson Highlands State Park, the historic Green Cove Station and the upper reaches of the Virginia Creeper Trail. These facilities are presently utilized by hundreds of thousands of travelers each year from throughout the nation, but they can accommodate many more visitors. An improved Route 600 will create the rapid access which will enable tourism growth in the Mount Rogers-Whitetop vicinity to occur with many corresponding benefits for the travel industry in and around the Town of Chilhowie and throughout Smyth, Washington and Grayson Counties. Businesses such as restaurants, hotels, shops featuring local handiwork and stores offering outdoor equipment will be launched, and existing travel related businesses will be expanded.

The reconstruction of Route 600 will also provide much better access for the residents of the Konnarock, Whitetop and Green Cove communities to Interstate 81 and much safer transportation for school buses and other group travel.

I want to express my appreciation to U.S. Senator John Warner for the many years that he and I worked together in obtaining the federal funding for this project.

I also want to recognize the effective work of the Virginia Department of Transportation which oversaw this large road project. Steve Buston, Resident Engineer with the VDOT Abingdon Residency, and Jim Givens, the Bristol District Administrator for VDOT, deserve our thanks today for their efforts.

I also commend W&L Construction for the outstanding work they have performed in creating the new Route 600.

The improved roadway will greatly aid our efforts in boosting Southwest Virginia's tourism economy , I congratulate the residents of Virginia's rooftop localities for the benefits which they will realize from the new Route 600.